

FANTASIES OF THE UNSEXUALIZED OTHER, OR,
THE NAIVETÉ OF THE ARAB MIND

by Todd McGowan

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Most fantasies of the racial and ethnic other sustain a remarkable consistency. Some, like that of the avaricious Jew, have endured in relatively the same form for centuries. Until very recently, the Western fantasy of the Arab partook of the same consistency. The Arab man was the embodiment of extreme sexual enjoyment: he lived an exotic life in the desert; he had access to the mystical secrets of the East; and, most importantly, he was a great lover. Often, the Arab man's amorous power required a harem of women to satisfy. This fantasy image of the Arab man found its most iconic representation in the figure of Rudolf Valentino as he appeared in *The Sheik* (George Melford, 1921) and the sequel *Son of the Sheik* (George Fitzmaurice, 1926).¹ With his mysterious sexuality, the Sheik, like Valentino himself, has a magnetic effect on women and arouses extreme jealousy in other men. As the Sheik, Valentino stands in for an eroticism that spans the entire Arab world. As Edward Said puts it in *Orientalism*, "the Orient was a place where one could look for sexual experience unobtainable in Europe."² In all forms of Western fantasy—films, novels, poetry, paintings, and music—an association with the Arab world was an association with extreme sexual enjoyment.

This image of Arab sexuality, despite its long dominance in the Western fantasy structure, has largely disappeared.³ The fantasy of the Arab man (and the related fantasy of the Arab woman) that has emerged in recent years emphasizes his lack of sexual enjoyment rather than his sexual prowess. With the emergence of fear about Arab terrorism and the increase in concern about Islamic fundamentalism, the fantasy of the Arab, as it has undergone this dramatic and unprecedented transformation, has also become the predominant fantasy of the racial and ethnic other, displacing other fantasies that had been far more significant. As this fantasy has changed, it has at precisely the same time become central.

The shift in the form of the fantasy of the Arab should be shocking to us because it runs completely counter to the fundamental ideological task of the fantasy of the racial other. The fantasy of the racial other typically involves associating this figure with extreme enjoyment, the enjoyment that can enter into the social order only in a disavowed form. The enjoyment attributed to the racial other drives the subjects within the social order, but it does so indirectly. The fantasy of the racial other allows subjects within a social order to define themselves through the enjoyment that they have given up as members of the society. The racial other's enjoyment marks what subjects have sacrificed and simultaneously identifies a possibility for enjoyment for them, even as it is simultaneously proscribed. They access it and experience it through the medium of fantasy—and thus enjoy the racial other's enjoyment in a way that the racial other itself never does. The idea of racial difference plays a crucial role here because it associates the other's enjoyment with the real of race, thereby ensuring an unsurpassable distance between the fantasizing subject and this enjoyment. The ultimate enjoyment must remain fundamentally inaccessible for me if it is to remain ultimate, and racial difference creates this inaccessibility.

Given the traditional function that the fantasy of the racial other plays in a subject's psychic life, the emergence of the Arab bereft of sexual enjoyment and naïve concerning matters of sexuality seems inexplicable. Of course, fantasies portraying the racial other as naïve or unintelligent have a long history: even the ancient Greeks viewed foreign peoples through the lens of this type of fantasy, and it certainly informed anti-black racism in the United States. But what is different about these fantasies is that they also associated rampant sexuality with the absence of intelligence. The unintelligent black man was at the same time a hypersexual threat that one must lynch and castrate if he ever directed this sexuality toward a white woman. No such image of the Arab man exists today; in fact, the prevailing fantasy reveals not that the Arab

man is a sexual threat to the Western woman but that her sexuality actually threatens him. Within the fantasy structure, the Arab terrorist certainly represents a danger to Western civilization as such, but he does not represent a specific danger to Western women. The Arab is a naïf when it comes to the question of sexual enjoyment. The hypersexual and exotic Arab—the Sheik and his many progeny—has completely disappeared from the Western fantasy scene.

The desexualization of the Arab coincides not just with the rise of concern over terrorism but also with a change in our relationship to enjoyment. Whereas social authority has traditionally prohibited enjoyment, today it commands us to enjoy. This transformation from the prohibition of enjoyment to an imperative to enjoy has radically changed the nature of the social order. We now live surrounded by seemingly infinite images of enjoyment and inducements to enjoy. But the problem is that shift from prohibition toward an injunction to enjoy has made enjoyment all the more difficult. Despite the multitude of images of enjoyment that we see every day, enjoyment still seems out of reach. In fact, these images of enjoyment serve to remind us of our lack of enjoyment. The more the social order bombards us with pressure to enjoy, the more we experience our failure to do so. This dramatic social transformation thus demands a corresponding transformation in our fantasy life.

Historically, fantasies of the racial other allowed subjects to imagine and enjoy the untrammled sexuality of the other that the limits of the social order would not allow them. The fantasy of the Arab man with his harem of women all ready to please him sexually is an exemplary case. One accepts the limit of a single wife and a monogamous relation with her as long as one can have recourse to the fantasy of the harem. The subject enjoys the fantasy, and this fantasy suffuses the would-be mundane reality of monogamy with enjoyment. In the wake of the emergence of the injunction to enjoy, however, the fantasy of the Arab man with the harem is

no longer necessary. The Western male now has almost unlimited access to images of enjoyment on the internet, on television, and in the cinema. But this surfeit of sexual stimulation renders the stimulation less stimulating. Pornography that one can easily and stealthily access over the internet loses its capacity to arouse, especially after the thousandth viewing. It is in response to this changed situation of the Western subject in relation to enjoyment that the fantasy of the Arab has undergone a complete reversal.

As a result of our changed social situation, the task of fantasy today is not what it once was. The Western subject does not need fantasy in order to access excessive enjoyment because excessive enjoyment surrounds this subject on a daily basis. For such a subject, fantasy must find a way to render all of these images of excessive enjoyment enjoyable. The contemporary Western subject finds itself awash in images of enjoyment that it is unable to enjoy. Under the auspices of the imperative to enjoy, the provocative no longer provokes; the stimulating no longer stimulates; and the titillating no longer titillates. The fantasy of the naïve Arab comes to the rescue of the Western subject: for the naïve Arab, a miniskirt or a thong would be uncontrollably arousing rather than simply the indifferent material of everyday life. By fantasizing the Arab as a sexual naïf, we find a way to re-eroticize the images that have become commonplace and to recreate the possibility of scandal.

The radical transformation of the fantasy of the Arab has occurred in our political and social discourse about Arab life and, even more prominently, in Hollywood's depictions of Arabs. Attempts to explain the actions of the September 11th suicide bombers expose the new fantasy structure clearly. In the aftermath of the attacks, the commonsensical explanation for the actions of the individuals involved was the reward of 72 virgins awaiting them in the afterlife. This idea informed the most infamous of the controversial Danish cartoons (which depicted

Allah lamenting that he was running out of virgins because there were so many martyrs). The reward of 72 virgins for the Islamic martyr has little textual support in the *Koran* or elsewhere in Islamic thought, and it was clear to everyone seriously analyzing the attacks that this reward was not the reason why martyrs blew themselves up. As Robert Pape notes, “Many, perhaps most, suicide terrorists fit the paradigm of altruistic suicide.”⁴ They viewed their suicide as a way of sacrificing on behalf of their nation or religion.

And yet, the image of the 72 virgins serves as perhaps the most widely repeated explanation in much of the West because it fits perfectly within the controlling fantasy structure of the Arab. Only a sexual naïf would sacrifice himself for the promise of virgins in paradise since, as many Western commentators and bloggers have noted, virgins tend to produce subpar sexual experiences.⁵ Experienced Westerners know this while naïve Arab terrorists do not, and it is the sexual naiveté of the Arab that aligns him fantasmatically with the possibility of the ultimate sexual enjoyment. Unlike the cynical Western subject, the naïve Arab sustains the capacity for arousal. It is the idea of this capacity for arousal that also informs Western coverage of Arab woman and their dress.

Like all reporting, reporting on activities in Arab countries is not an empirical enterprise. Though well-intentioned reporters may carefully relay only the facts that they discover in the area they choose to investigate, fantasy determines where they will look and what they will look for. The contemporary fantasy of the sexually inexperienced and naïve Arab leads to media coverage of the repression of female sexuality in the Arab world. Though most Americans knew almost nothing about the customs and mores of Afghan society in the immediate aftermath of the September 11th attacks, they did know about the burqa, the item of clothing designed to cover the entire body of a woman. Emphasis on the Taliban’s demand that women wear the burqa fits

the fantasy of the Arab man as a sexual naïf who is unable to handle a confrontation with female sexuality. While Western reporters can justify their coverage of the burqa or the veil as a product of concern for women's rights, it receives a much warmer reception than reporting on the status of women's rights in the West insofar as it nourishes the predominant fantasy.

Perhaps the most astounding instance of the transformation of the fantasy of the Arab is the explosion in popularity of Raphael Patai's *The Arab Mind* after the September 11th attacks. Patai's book, written in 1973, contains a swath of generalizations and stereotypes about Arab society. No expert on Arab culture or society would find any useful insights in the book because Patai leaps too effortlessly from examples of particular behaviors to wild universal claims about Arabs. And yet, with the rise of a terrorist threat from Arab nations, *The Arab Mind* became an important text for the U.S. military in its preparation to deal with an Arab enemy. Colonel Novelle B. De Atkine testifies to this in the foreword to the 2002 edition of Patai's book, where he asserts, "At the institution where I teach military officers, *The Arab Mind* forms the basis of my cultural instruction."⁶ De Atkine was not alone in his use of the text as a training manual. But equally important, the book informed neoconservative thinking about how to engage the Arab world.⁷

The image of the Arab mind that Patai propagates is not that of the traditional fantasy. Patai's Arab is not an overly sensual sheik, an image that he actually confronts as a misleading "stereotype." Instead, Patai's description of Arab masculinity focuses on its childlike quality. The Arab, as Patai sees it, lacks a sense of reality, is prone to extreme outbursts, spends a long time at the maternal breast, has no sense of time, and, perhaps most significantly, is sexually inexperienced. Almost every aspect of Patai's account of the Arab mind implicitly equates the Arab with a child, but this child is not Freud's child of polymorphous perversity. It is rather the

child of sexual innocence. Patai recounts that “the average Arab, unless he happens to live in a larger town where prostitutes are available, or where, as in Beirut, Western sexual mores have begun to penetrate, has no sexual experience with women until he marries. If we add the fact that the average Arab does not marry until his middle or even late twenties (what with the necessity of paying a bride price to the father of his chosen), we find that usually years pass between sexual maturation and the beginning of licit heterosexual activity.”⁸ Here, Patai emphasizes what remains clear throughout his entire discussion of Arab sexuality: the Arab man is a sexual naïf, inexperienced and easily aroused. His book’s popularity is indissociable from its commitment to this fantasy image.

Whether or not *The Arab Mind* played a crucial role in shaping the mindset behind the torture at Abu Ghraib, the form that this torture took emerges out of the same fantasy structure that the book proffers.⁹ The torture did not take the form of excessive physical pain but that of sexual humiliation, especially in front of women. The torturers forced their Arab prisoners into sexual enjoyment because they believed that this enjoyment would be more disturbing than any physical harm that they might inflict. The controlling fantasy animating the behavior of the torturers at Abu Ghraib was the fantasy of the sexually inexperienced and vulnerable Arab male that Patai insists on in his book. The torturers brought this fantasy to Abu Ghraib not necessarily because they read and internalized Patai’s ideas but because this fantasy now provides the framework through which Western subjects relate to the Arab world.

The fantasy of the naïve and childlike Arab informs even those representations that depict the threat of Arab terrorism. In fact, the idea of the Arab terrorist in contemporary Hollywood almost corresponds by necessity with an image of Arab naiveté. This correlation manifests itself clearly in three examples: Peter Berg’s *The Kingdom* (2007), Jon Favreau’s *Iron Man* (2008), and

the television series *24* (2001-). In each case, though Arab figures threaten American lives, they appear naïve and the threat that they embody is completely nonsexual.

The Kingdom attempts to present a complex portrait of Saudi Arabian life. Though the film focuses on terrorist violence, it also depicts a modern Saudi police official who befriends the American FBI agents and displays a genuine desire to fight Islamic extremism. He is a fully sympathetic character: not only does he act heroically on the side of the FBI agents, we also see him at home with his family and taking care of his sick father. But ironically it is this figure, Colonel Faris Al Ghazi (Ashraf Barhom), who most betrays the film's investment in the new Arab fantasy. Al Ghazi recoils and upbraids American Adam Leavitt (Jason Bateman) when the latter curses. He places a partition dividing the cot set up for agent Janet Mayes (Jennifer Garner) from those of her three male colleagues, and he tells her that he had wanted to provide separate sleeping quarters altogether. When the agents meet a Saudi prince, Al Ghazi ensures that Mayes will have a coat to put over her T-shirt so as not to offend the prince with exposure to her bare arms. The film shows that Al Ghazi, though he is a modern thinking Saudi, manifests a profound innocence. As a result, he has the capacity to be aroused, unlike his cynical American counterparts.

In *Iron Man*, the Arab men who kidnap Tony Stark (Robert Downey Jr.) while he is in Afghanistan demonstrating a new weapons system initially appear as dangerous and sophisticated terrorists. They imprison Stark and force him to build the weapon that he developed for the American military for them. But while Stark is supposedly working on this weapon system, he actually creates a weaponized iron suit for himself that allows him to escape. Despite their surveillance cameras, the Arab captors do not notice what he is really doing until he has already succeeded in finishing the device. Stark then successfully escapes from the group of

Arabs holding him, despite their overwhelming numerical advantage. Later, after he has become Iron Man, Stark returns to Afghanistan to defend a group of villagers against the terrorist gang that held him. Here, the film divides Arabs into the menacing terrorists (who would senselessly slaughter the innocent) and the pure victims. Iron Man quickly defeats the terrorists and saves the villagers, but the film soon makes clear that this terrorist threat is not the real threat. The villain of *Iron Man* is a white man, Stark's partner Obidiah Stane (Jeff Bridges), who manipulates the Arab group into kidnapping Stark and then easily steals the suit that Stark developed from them. As he kills the leader of the Arab group, he notes the Arab inability to understand technology. Though placing a white character in the position of the principal villain in lieu of an Arab group would seem to represent a departure from the typical fantasy of the Arab terrorist, it actually furthers the fantasy through its reduction of the Arabs to a childlike status. We can see a similar gesture in the case of *24*.

Given its focus on terrorism and counterterrorism, *24* perhaps inevitably would fall into proffering fantasmatic depictions of Arab terrorists. Though the show's villains aren't always Arab, Arabs make up enough of the terrorist enemy to have occasioned protests by Arab Americans. *24* certainly produces the image of the dangerous Arab terrorist, but the show typically qualifies this image by depicting the geopolitical context behind it. That is to say, the image of the Arab terrorist on *24* is always a complex image, one that usually shows the roots of terrorism in the machinations of American politics or American capital. As Christian Blauvelt points out in his analysis of Arab stereotyping in Hollywood,

Muslims have popped up most frequently on the series as the bad guys. Every season in which they have been featured, however, a controversy erupts; and [series creator Joel] Surnow attempts to posit a counter-narrative to defuse the situation. For instance, while

Muslims are behind the plot to detonate a nuclear bomb in Los Angeles in season two of *24*, we later learn that these figures are nothing more than pawns manipulated by U.S. neo-conservative politicians to make the Democratic administration of President David Palmer seem incapable of defending the country. By scripting the Muslim terrorists as pawns, Surnow seemingly lessens their villainy in comparison to Palmer's rivals.¹⁰

Blauvelt's reading of *24* considers the depiction of white conservatives as ultimately responsible for terrorist attacks to be the result of political pressure on the show's creator. It is true that the show's tendency to locate responsibility with white conservatives and American business leaders has allowed left-leaning fans to defend their enjoyment of the show despite its clear link to the normalization of torture practices. But the exculpation of the Arabs on *24* also allows the show to play into the new fantasy of the naïve Arab.

My claim is that *24* insists on the responsibility of white American leaders for terrorist activity perpetuated by Arab characters not in response to political pressure or to create political complexity but in order to further the fantasmatic infantilizing of the Arab. This narrative turn appeases the left-leaning viewer while at the same time appealing to the unconscious fantasy structure informing the popular image of Arabs. Even the most ruthless Arab terrorist has a profound innocence in his approach to the world that permits the white Western power structure to manipulate him. While this innocence takes away his responsibility, it also renders him capable of enjoying where the Western subject no longer can. The task of the fantasy of the Arab today is not so much constructing a terrorist enemy as illustrating for us someone who has the ability to enjoy where we have become cynical. The oxymoronic figure of the naïve terrorist fills the fantasmatic role for the West. Through this fantasy, we can imagine a capacity for enjoyment that we no longer have.

At every sociohistorical moment, one fantasy of the racial or ethnic other rises to ascendancy. At the end of the 19th- and beginning of the 20th-century in the United States, it was the fantasy of lazy and lascivious black men, concretized by D. W. Griffith's landmark film *The Birth of a Nation*. The result was an epidemic of lynching and Jim Crow laws. In the depression-era Europe of the 1930s, it was the fantasy of manipulative Jews destroying the economy by taking more than their share. The result was the systematic murder of 6 million Jews. In these cases and multiple others, the fantasy had nothing to do with the actual behavior of blacks or Jews or any other object of fantasy. Instead, the fantasies of the racial other serve to mobilize the enjoyment of American whites or Aryan Europeans through the disavowal of that enjoyment. Today, the predominant fantasy of the racial other is that of the Arab, but the function that it serves is now quite different from that of the lusty black man or the greedy Jew. The Arab of Western fantasies must be naïve enough to find the banality of Western inducements arousing. This fantasy will retain its power until we recognize that the Arab's capacity for arousal is in fact our own.

¹ Rudolf Valentino was, of course, not Arab, and the first film does mention his European ancestry. Nonetheless, the film shows him passing for an Arab. The fact that an Italian could become the iconic representative of the exotic Arab indicates the purely fantasmatic quality of this figure and its distance from any realities of Arab existence.

² Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage, 1978), 190.

³ The fantasy of the hypersexualized Arab man endures with full force through the 1980s and then abates in the 1990s. As Jack Shaheen notes in his encyclopedia of Hollywood's anti-Arab stereotyping: "The movies of the 1980s are especially offensive. They display insolent desert sheikhs with thick accents threatening to rape and/or enslave starlets" (Jack Shaheen, *Reel Bad Arabs: How Hollywood Villifies a People* (New York: Interlink Books, 2001), 22.

⁴ Robert A. Pape, *Dying to Win: The Strategic Logic of Suicide Terrorism* (New York: Random House, 2005), 23. Pape's view is not that of a sympathizer with the politics of Arab suicide bombers. He writes in order to help the United States "to win the war on terrorism" (Pape, *Dying to Win*, 7).

⁵ See, for instance, Cecil Adams, who asks, "Think back on the first nights you've been party to. Was this your idea of great sex?" (Cecil Adams, "Does the Koran Really Promise Islamic Martyrs 72 Virgins?" *The Straight Dope* (14 December 2001): <http://www.straightdope.com/columns/read/2329/does-the-koran-really-promise-martyrs-72-virgins>.

⁶ Novelle B. De Atkine, Foreword to *The Arab Mind*, rev. ed. (New York: Hatherleigh Press, 2002), x-xviii.

⁷ Seymour Hersh documents the importance of *The Arab Mind* for the neoconservative movement in general. See Seymour Hersh, "The Gray Zone: How a Secret Pentagon Program Came to Abu Ghraib," *The New Yorker* (24 May 2004): http://www.newyorker.com/archive/2004/05/24/040524fa_fact.

⁸ Raphael Patai, *The Arab Mind*, rev. ed. (New York: Hatherleigh Press, 2002), 130.

⁹ Many journalists and theorists have made the connection between Patai's book and the torture at Abu Ghraib. For instance, Ann Marlowe notes, "There is no straight line from *The Arab Mind* to Abu Ghraib, or to the war in Iraq, but there is a suggestive trail." Ann Marlowe, "Sex, Violence and the *Arab Mind*," *Salon.com* (8 June 2004): http://dir.salon.com/story/books/feature/2004/06/08/arab_mind.

¹⁰ Christian Blauvelt, "Aladdin, Al-Qaeda, and Arabs in U.S. Film and TV," *Jump Cut: A Review of Contemporary Media* 50 (Spring 2008): <http://www.ejumpcut.org/currentissue/reelBadArabs/3.html>.